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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 002782

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SUBJECT: MALIKI CONFIDANTE CAREFUL ON SOFA AND DISPUTES  
IMPORTANCE OF SUNNI ARAB TRIBES FOR SECURITY

REF: BAGHDAD 2741

Classified By: POLMINCONS ROBERT S. FORD. REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: One of Prime Minister's closest confidantes told us August 28 that the Prime Minister will keep asserting the Baghdad government's right to deploy the Iraqi army up to the Green Line. He acknowledged Kurdish sensitivities over towns like Khanaqin and Kirkuk but insisted they are below the Green Line and hence the Kurds have no right to assume security control for them. PolMinCouns urged caution and restraint and al-Askari said the Iraqi government would act only carefully and after consultation with the Kurds. Askari opined that the Iraqi armed forces were unlikely to need American help for more than another several more years after which time the American forces could leave. He emphasized that the SOFA negotiations will be a major domestic political issue in advance of the provincial council elections. Thus, he stressed, the agreement would face major challenges in the Iraqi Political Council for National Security and the parliament. Askari added that the provincial council elections in turn were vital for Iraq's future. If those political groups supporting a mostly federal state win the upcoming provincial elections, strong Kurdish and Shia regions would emerge with the central government greatly weakened. That weaker central state is not how Maliki sees the state. End Summary.

MALIKI UPBRAIDS THE KURDS

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¶2. (C) Council of Representatives member Sami al-Askari told us August 28 that the Prime Minister is determined as a matter of principle to assert the Iraqi government's right to deploy its forces up to the Green Line. Al-Askari said that Maliki needed to demonstrate to the Sunni Arabs, and the JAM leaders, that he treated the Peshmerga the same way he treats other militias. There could be no special exception for the Peshmerga when it operated south of the Green Line. (See reftel for the Kurdish warning that Maliki is approaching a Kurdish red line on this issue.)

¶3. (C) Askari added that the Prime Minister feels he could legally deploy the Iraqi Army into the KRG territory after informing the Kurds - but that he needn't secure KRG authorization for even that deployment. Informing is not the same as seeking approval, Askari highlighted. (Askari asserted that legally the GoI was not obliged even to inform the Kurdish leadership or anyone else about troop deployments outside the KRG.) Askari recounted how on the evening of 8/25 Maliki had a terse conversation with DPM Barham Salih about troop deployments near Khanaqin. Stating that he had been sitting with Maliki during the phone call, Askari said that Maliki at one point snapped to Salih that if Maliki wanted to deploy Iraqi Army troops even to Erbil, he didn't need Salih's permission or that of anyone else from Kurdistan. Askari noted quietly that Maliki can be a difficult personality sometimes.

¶4. (C) PolMinCouns said that he didn't want to argue the

constitutional legalities but instead focus on political and security strategies. Direct fighting between the IA and the Peshmerga in a place like Diyala would be a strategic loss for Iraq and the U.S. and a net gain for Turkey, Iran and Iraq's other problematic neighbors. PolMinCouns stressed the Iraqis need to consult each other. Askari agreed on the problems and said the Iraqi government would move slowly (but he implied it would keep pushing the issue). He admonished the U.S. for having been too soft on the Kurds during the last several years and said now the U.S. needed to insist they obey Iraqi law. Askari allowed that if the Kurds followed constitutional procedures and all the laws fairly, they might well get all they want (ie. Kirkuk). If they try to grab territory, the Baghdad government must and will resist them.

IRAQI ARMY NOW GOOD, GETTING BETTER

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¶5. (C) Askari opined that the Iraqi Army's capabilities are growing steadily. He recalled how relatively small and weak it had been well into 2007. He contrasted its poor performance then to more recent operations in the Basra, Sadr City, Mosul and Diyala operations. Polmincouns agreed the Iraqi forces had come far but wondered how much longer the Iraqis expected to need American assistance. Askari mused that more American help would like be needed for about another two years, if the current rate of Iraqi Army improvement continued. In addition, he stressed, Iraq needs an air force and re-establishing an air force would require 2-3 years of American help. Askeri stated that he was confident by the end of 2011 the Iraqis would need no further

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help from the Americans.

SOFA TALKS - POLITICAL CALCULATIONS

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¶6. (C) Askari added that the Prime Minister was emphasizing the 2011 date in the SOFA discussions because he was worried about the political blowback during the upcoming provincial elections. He stated that no political party would be eager to support the Americans publicly lest they appear weak before the voters. Maliki was especially concerned that Sadrist and Fadhila representatives in the Political Council for National Security would start a stampede against the SOFA text that would carry over into the Parliament. (Comment: He acknowledged that provincial council election voters would be also interested in delivery of services like water and electricity, but he thought all parties would criticize the Americans almost as a check-the-box exercise. End Comment.) Askari added that the Najaf clerics' careful attention to the SOFA was further complicating Maliki's calculations; he called their stance unhelpful.

¶7. (C) Askari highlighted the importance of the future provincial council elections, noting that they loomed large in Maliki's thinking. (He opined that Maliki would want to support having the provincial council elections this year, since Dawa might gain support due to Maliki's better image resulting from improved security. He claimed Dawa has polling showing this.) Maliki was being cautious not to undercut Dawa's chances by looking weak to the Americans, he noted. Moreover, Askari opined, if rival Shia Islamist party ISCI scores big victories in southern Iraqi provincial councils, the way will be clear for it to launch its nine-province region. Dawa rejects this, Askari noted. (He said Dawa would not want regions in southern Iraq to be larger than one or two governorates.) In addition, Askari highlighted the importance of a good election process in Kirkuk, predicting that if the Kurds won a solid majority of the Kirkuk provincial council seats they would then move forward expeditiously to annex Kirkuk into the KRG with all the problems that would cause.

18. (C) Al-Askari said that the GoI would move forward in integrating about twenty percent of the Sons of Iraq into the security forces. However, he noted, the other eighty percent could not be absorbed easily into civilian jobs given the bloated state of the civil service already. (He claimed civil service rolls had grown from 1.2 million to 2.2 million since 2003.) PolMinCouns cautioned that the transition for Sons of Iraq was important to maintaining improved security. He told Askari that the vocational training programs would help, and the Iraqi government should ask for help designing and implementing it from the international community if it needed help. Askari discounted the role of the Sahwa/Sons of Iraq in bringing down violence in Iraq. He countered that instead it was the improved strength of the Iraqi army together with the surge in American forces. Moreover, he doubted that Sunni Arab tribesmen would return to violence if not employed or at least paid by the Iraqi Government. The Iraqi army was strong enough, he claimed, to deter them and they lacked moral authority to attack American forces after having cooperated with them.

COMMENT

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19. (C) Askari's viewpoints are interesting both as a reflection of the more nationalist Shia Islamists from whom Prime Minister Maliki draws his original political base and also because of his personal insights into the Prime Minister. We've known Sami al-Askari since 2004. He is usually soft spoken but seemingly relatively open expressing his views. Dating back to at least 2004 he has kept close ties to Sadrists and then with the very top Dawa leaders, first Ibrahim Jafari and now Nuri al-Maliki. Many here think that Askari is one of Maliki's closest confidantes. He has a new house in the Little Venice neighborhood that is a short walk to the Prime Minister's office and residence. In this conversation, al-Askari excoriated the British for not helping the Iraqi Army at Basra during its March 2008 offensive there; after the British denied help sought by the Prime Minister, Maliki decided their forces would have to go, he said. By contrast, Askari evinced no anti-Americanism, but he made clear that the military relationship would undergo huge changes in the months and years ahead. While advisors to Maliki like Askari and Sadik Rikabi discount the utility of transition programs for Sahwa/Sons of Iraq, the Prime Minister himself told us August 28 that he wanted to move ahead on the program and the government is slowly

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gearing up some programs. It seems likely, however, that their heart is not really in it and if they encounter pushback from their Shia constituencies, they won't push it forward very hard. In addition, Askari's comments on the importance of the next provincial elections to the future of the Iraqi central government are especially important. The scenario Askari sketched out would leave a dramatically weaker central government flanked by strong Kurdish and Shia regions. That is definitely not in keeping with Maliki's vision of a relatively strong central state.

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